

ANIMALS - PLOVERS

Birds take back beach

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PLYMOUTH — Another nest of piping plovers hatched on Plymouth Long Beach Monday. And vehicle restrictions, relaxed just last week, are back in full force.

On July 6 a nest of newly hatched chicks caused the immediate closing of the crossover, the passage between the roadway and the bayside beach. The boat access gate to the bayside was also closed to vehicles. The baby birds will be monitored for at least a week. If they wander away from the crossover or limit themselves to traveling around in a smaller area, the protected zone could be reduced and the crossover reopened.

Under the terms of the federal injunction against the town, beach officers must keep a 200 meter vehicle free buffer zone around the chicks. After a week of intense monitoring and data collection, that zone can, under some circumstances, be reduced to 100 meters. The crossover falls between the 100 and 200 meter zones around this particular nest, but plover families tend to wander, so there is no telling where they'll end up in a week.

The crossover had been open on most days for weeks and, just last week, natural resource officer Rick Souza had opened up another 100 feet of beach to the north for parking. The baby birds' timing was really quite good, Souza said. They waited to hatch until after the holiday weekend.

"It worked out beautifully this weekend," Souza said. "There were no problems on the Fourth and everybody enjoyed themselves."

The Fourth of July weekend was the busiest on Long Beach yet this year. With restrictions temporarily reduced, there was space, depending on the tide, for up to 120 vehicles to park on the beach at one time. Souza reported 163 four-wheel-drive vehicles passed through the crossover during the weekend.

The crowds have kept beach staff busy cleaning up, however. Souza said a crew spent all day Monday and Tuesday picking up trash and cleaning the entire length of the barrier beach.

Two other broods of piping plovers, a total of six more chicks, learned to fly this week. Besides the newly hatched nest near the crossover, there are six other broods of plovers being monitored, all north of the crossover. Recent storms have taken their toll. Monitors report a marked decrease in chicks. There were only 10 left as of Tuesday. One nest was destroyed by a predator, leaving only one left with eggs yet to hatch.

Long Beach stickers require a four-wheel-drive vehicle and proof of residency. They are available at town hall for a recently reduced price of \$25, \$12.50 for senior citizens.